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ABSTRACT

Articles in this volume of the "Illinois English Bulletin" include "Competencies in Teaching English" by Alan C. Purves, which sets forth a tentative model for planning competency-based instruction and certification based on concepts, teaching acts, skills, and strategies; "Passing the Buck Versus the Teaching of English" by Dennis Q. McInerny, which suggests that the burden of teaching English belongs to the teacher and should be faced with professional finesse; and "Electives Are Coming! Electives Are Coming!" by Daniel R. Silkowski, which discusses the implementation of an elective program at Maine West High School in Des Plaines, Illinois. (HOD)

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COMPETENCIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH

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The idea of competence in teaching and training is both new and not new. People have long said, "He's a great teacher," or "She can't teach." These intuitive judgments, based on observation of people in the act of teaching or memory of classes in which one has been, goes on every day. What is new in the 1970's is the possibility that one can systematically, if not scientifically, define the attributes of a good or bad teacher and to develop criteria for competence and thus guidelines for teacher education. As education began to develop as a separate field from its parent disciplines of philosophy and psychology, so people began to look at the act of teaching from a philosophic or a social scientific point of view. From this series of studies emerged ways of looking at the logic or rhetoric of teaching and ways of looking at teacher-pupil interaction.

An obvious next step was the exploration of that most important matter, the relationship between various acts of the teacher and the behavior or learning of the student. If relationship and causality could be determined, then a science of teaching could begin to emerge. If no causality exists, then the actions of a teacher or the teacher's rhetorical strategies--are independent of their intended effects. Most of the research in the nexus of teaching and learning has been reviewed by Barak Rosenshine, who concludes that little save such generalities as broad knowledge, openness, variety, have an effect on student achievement. At this point there is virtually no empirical evidence about the efficacy of any teaching act or strategy as it might affect student learning. To determine the criteria for a good teacher, or the competencies involved in teaching the

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language arts, then, one must look to authority, opinion, and introspection, all time-honored determinants of what should be done. After all, they are what we have been relying on for generations.

A competent teacher, we might say, is first of all one that knows the subject to be taught. A teacher of English must have a knowledge of the English language--its structure and its history. Second would come a knowledge of rhetorical theory and practice--both oral and written rhetoric. Third would come a knowledge of literature and of criticism. These three areas form the tripod with which we are all so familiar. The limits of knowledge in each of these areas seem infinite; minimal knowledges for teaching must be arbitrarily defined. Recent surveys like the English Teacher Preparation Guidelines and the Illinois State-Wide Curriculum project in English Teacher Preparation both set forth minimal levels of preparation in these subjects: knowledge of structural, traditional, and transformational grammars; knowledge of Aristotelian and Platonic rhetorics; knowledge of "new" and thematic criticism. Certainly all of these knowledges are important, although specifics within these broad areas become difficult to determine. In literature, it is important for a prospective teacher to have a working knowledge of popular literature and of adolescent literature, as well as of the literature of the ethnic and regional minorities. In rhetoric, it would be useful for a student to be aware of the rhetorics of Ken Macrorie and of James Moffett, since both are used in the schools. In language, it is important for a student to have a knowledge of dialectology, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics, as well as a command of traditional grammar sufficient to cope with Warriner and with school boards, of transformational grammar sufficient to deal with the textbooks of Paul Roberts and Owen Thomas, and of structural grammar sufficient to undertake contrastive analysis of the students' dialects and whatever passes for "standard."

If I seem to be placing a premium on knowledge and prescribing a curriculum suitable for a PhD, it is for a reason. I have noticed that teachers--both prospective and working teachers--have to cope with all these matters, yet they haven't as much at their fingertips as they should have, and they do not have a means of acquiring the knowledge that they need. So they avoid teaching their students language, composition, and an appropriate strategy of response. Many of the content courses do

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not give the teacher the concepts about the subject that are powerful, or if they present those courses they do so in a way that details take on greater meaning than the concept itself. In language, the concept of deep and surface structure is probably one of the most powerful, but too few texts and classes allow the college student to worry that concept. Phrase structure rules become the important matters. Courses in literature seldom prepare the student to deal critically with a new work, and none go into the reasons for approaching literature in a particular way or into a conscious examination of critical strategies. I have noticed that current lists of competencies tend to list trivia or test items rather than the concepts those items measure. This act perpetuates the inanity of most catalogues of behavioral objectives. English courses do allow students to act like English student-scholars--to perform critical and historical research, but they do not provide students with the metatheory that is going to help them determine why they do what they do. The metaconcepts of language, literature, and rhetoric are important for they can enable a student to move into new material--a new textbook, a mini-course framework, or an open or closed teaching situation with a certain degree of confidence. I should stress here that to say that a teacher should have all of this knowledge is *not* to say that the teacher will impart that knowledge to students. A teacher must know more than will be spewed forth in a class or a unit. Thus, and only thus, can a teacher understand that which students do and why they do it.

A second set of concepts that a teacher should have at command are those dealing with learning and development, particularly as learning and development are related to the mother tongue. Concepts of learning come, of course, from the theories of Piaget, Erickson, and others, but those general concepts must be seen in the context of language learning not as vague theory. It is for that reason that one might well set forth a series of competencies based on the ability of prospective teachers to observe students in the process of behaving and to determine what operations they are performing with respect to the mother tongue. In language, one should be able to look at the developmental indices set forth by Carol Chomsky, Kenneth Goodman, and others, as they are illustrated in the talk or writing of children. In rhetoric, one needs to be able to make a rhetorical analysis of a student essay; not simply to grade it. In literature, one needs to be able to describe the critical stance taken by a student in a classroom discussion. A prospective

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teacher, then, should have the ability to observe the linguistic behavior of people at various levels and should be able to analyze that behavior. It is this observing and analytic ability that enables a teacher to make effective judgments about students' strengths and weaknesses, about how what a student is currently doing may be related to what that student could do. Instead of expecting a ninth grader to write a critical analysis of "After Apple-Picking" like the critical analysis the teacher wrote in college, the teacher might see how the ninth-grader acts *when he is acting like a ninth-grader.*

Learning theory as it is embodied in behavior with respect to the mother tongue is but a subset of general learning theory, one of the foundation knowledges that a prospective teacher should have. But as I have suggested that in subject matter the prospective teacher has no sense of the forest because all of college instruction deals with trees and how to deal with trees, so in the educational foundation courses, most prospective teachers get an overview and do not see how the overview relates to students with whom one is dealing in English courses. The teacher should, I would suggest, learn to perform the operations of the learning researcher and the educational psychologist or educational anthropologist. Competence in observing, recording, analyzing and interpreting behavior in the various facets of English would enable the teacher to function better as a diagnostician in the school and in the classroom. One national program that has been underway for the past four years is the Protocol Program under the EPDA branch of the United States Office of Education. This program, using the services of people in universities across the country, has been producing materials for teacher training: films, videotapes, audio tapes, that help a student isolate an instance of a concept (such as "shared nomenclature" in language learning, or "positive reinforcement" in teaching strategy, or "sociological interpretation" in a classroom discussion of literature), identify the ways in which the concept is being used, and interpret the actions of students or the teachers in the light of the conceptual framework. Skill with dealing with these concepts not in the abstract, but as they are being enacted in the behavior of people is important. Of course the test of whether the prospective teacher can understand the concept is to have the teacher observe or participate in an actual class and see whether he can isolate the concept amid all the other things that are happening.

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If having mastery of the master concepts in the mother-tongue and the learning of the mother-tongue were all, the task of training for competence and certifying competence would be relatively easy. The problem would entail defining what these concepts were and seeing the extent to which the teacher mastered them, whether he could define them, whether he could give instances of them, whether he could perceive those concepts in the behavior of others--both fictional behavior and real behavior, in both laboratory and actual surroundings.

But such mastery is not all, although we have proof that specific acts and skills directly contribute to the learning of children, we assume that the ability to present material, to talk clearly, to ask questions, to know how to praise, to follow a logical sequence, to select appropriate activities to introduce, explain, and extend learning: these and a number of other skills are signs of a teacher.

We can first say that there are certain acts that prospective teachers can perform. Some of these would be related to the construction of learning incidents: the teacher should be able to prepare instructional objectives, to find materials, to interpret diagnostic measures, to write out lesson plans, to construct assignments for classwork and for homework, to create a series or brief filler assignments for blank spaces in the day or week, to construct evaluation tasks, create motivational strategies and plays, and many more.

A second set of acts is related to what goes on in the classroom. The teacher should be able to ask questions so as to elicit answers exhibiting both the lower and the higher mental processes, to analyze the responses of students and be able to answer the students' questions in the terms that they ask them, to be able to use positive reinforcement, to discipline misbehaving students, to encourage reticent ones, to locate places where students seem to be lost, to switch to an alternate instructional mode when the students do not understand, to deliver clear explanations, and to admit ignorance.

A third set of acts would refer to post-teaching activities: rating papers, marking and correcting, giving grades, counseling, tutoring, making up tests, providing means for students to evaluate the instruction and the course. Another set of acts would refer to the extra-instructional activities of the teacher: relations with fellow teachers, with administrators, with parents and citizens groups, with professional organizations.

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All of these and many more constitute the professional acts of the teacher. Such acts may be dissociated from the subject matter that the teacher teaches: principles and acts in test construction or questioning exist apart from English or mathematics. In most cases, however, the subject matter acts to modify any general definition of the teaching act, and one should set subject-specific competencies and criteria.

But competency implies not merely the capacity to perform those strategies. The acts can be performed with greater or less skill. A teacher might make a better or a poorer test, might judge an essay more or less consistently and fairly, ask questions with more or less aplomb. The judge of skill in most cases is a master teacher or a professor, a person who acts as a judge at a diving contest, and seems able to give a 7 or a 5 on the basis of informed and respected opinion. No two judges will give the exact same opinion, but most observers of teaching find they can spot the adroit questioner or the able item-writer. Definitions of level of skill, then, must include reference to the judgment of an observer.

But acts and skill at performing acts are not all. The acts must fit into a pattern, a strategy of teaching. The questions must appear in a sequence and be related to activities and to rewards and responses. The test should follow from the objectives, and the grades should follow from the tests and the objectives. The sequencing of learning activities into a meaningful pattern for a group of slow students may differ from the sequencing for an able group. Both the sequencing itself and the distinction between sequences according to groups of students constitute strategies that a teacher must acquire.

Concepts, teaching acts, skills, strategies: these seem to be the components of a competency-based teacher education program. These components can be fitted into a model of proficiency moving from the ability to recognize or define the act, say, to being able to do it in a real teaching situation, to becoming adept at it to the extent of being able to teach it to others. In this model each stage serves as a measure of the efficacy of the preceding stage and indicates a curricular strategy. I would say indicates only because there is an immense flaw in the notion that learning to name a thing precedes doing it. Our knowledge of the development of language ability and its relation to linguistic terminology or formal grammar would belie that notion. So too would the sense of all of us that knowledge

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does not become significant until it is needed. If one is to build a curricular strategy on an idea of competency, one must interweave practice, book learning, observation, and simulation.

What I have said so far suggests that the process of defining competencies is both an immensely complex task and an arbitrary one. It is complex, for one must determine the level of specificity at which one will operate, the degree of atomism one wishes to undergo. I would urge that atomism be reserved for test constructors, not for program builders. It is arbitrary, for out of all the potential components of a competency-based system, one must assert that certain components are more important than others, that certain acts are more desired than others, that certain strategies are better than others. These assertions cannot be supported empirically now; they probably cannot be and I am unsure that they should be. One must make do with whatever wisdom and lore one has acquired.

Having been somewhat general and magesterial, I shall become arbitrary in my summary, and set forth a model. I would argue that the concepts one needs to have about literature in order to teach in general education would deal with the root aesthetic concepts: voice or character, shape, and metaphor. These three general concepts appear to permeate literature of whatever type; they are the aesthetic concepts upon which a spiral curriculum could be constructed. A second set of concepts would deal with the major thematic constructs of literature; and here I would turn to Northrop Frye or to the Freudians as being the best delineators of these concepts. Third would come a set of concepts related to reading competence--decoding, hypothesis testing, the relation of rate to retention, and comprehension among others. The fourth set would deal with the literary response, what its nature is, how it may be defined, how it appears at different stages and following different types of works, what are the categories of interest on the part of young people, and what sorts of works are interesting and appealing to different groups. These four sets of concepts would involve much reading, both of the literature of the high culture and that of popular culture; as well as viewing of films and television which might be said to be different manifestations of the literary experience. They would involve observation of people's responses in differing kinds of situations and expressions--talk papers, collages, dramatic readings, and the like.

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A TENTATIVE MODEL FOR PLANNING COMPETENCY-BASED INSTRUCTION AND CERTIFICATION

EXEMPLIFICATIONS

	Definition & Recognition	Interpretation	Laboratory Enactment	Actual Enactment	Instruction
CONCEPTS					
Literature					
Aesthetics					
Thematics					
Reading Competence					
Response					
Languages (Verbal & Non-Verbal)					
Phonemics & Morphemics					
Semantics					
Syntactics					
Rhetoric					
Generating Processes					
Education and Society					
Learning Theory					
Motivation					
Measurement and Evaluation					
ACTS					
Observation and Analysis					
Planning					
Interaction					
Evaluation					
Professional Relations					
STRATEGIES					
Relationships					
Sequencing					
ATTITUDES AND VALUES					

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The concepts about language and the generation of rhetorical utterances or composition would similarly be grouped under root concepts: syntactics, semantics, rhetoric, and the generating process (including dialect, language development, and the composing processes that children actually use). In both cases the concern is not merely with what people should be--with the ideal critic or reader or with the ideal writer or rhetor but, and more importantly, with what people are at various stages in their lives and in various parts of the society.

To turn from subject to pedagogy, concepts dealing with education and society, with learning theory, with measurement and evaluation, for me assume power. Some concepts dealing with teaching and counseling assume a lesser power--concepts such as those dealing with the nature of questioning, with the nature of feedback and teacher-pupil interaction. I would concentrate on some concepts dealing with the functions of school in our society, with cognitive and affective development, with motivation, with objectives and measurement of objectives. Other clusters might depend upon these, and I would certainly advocate an open exploration between subject matter person and educationist. It is in the derivation of these concepts and the relating of them to the teacher-training program that a wedding of the two schools might finally take place.

From concept to act and strategies: there are acts related to observation and analysis, acts related to planning, acts related to classroom interaction, acts related to evaluation, and acts related to professional relations. These five rubrics might operate as a first point for deriving a list of competencies.

Strategies would be the sequencing and relating of acts to one another and of acts to concepts. They would involve the construction of a learning unit, with rationale, objectives, material, structure, and evaluation. They would involve the conducting of large-group discussions and lessons, of conducting small-group activities and instruction, and of working out individualized programs. They might include the sequencing of materials--film, reading, dramatics, records--into a meaningful whole.

So far we have dealt with cognitive matters; certainly the competencies of a teacher include attitudes and values. They would include a sense of inquisitiveness about people, an interest in people and education, a sense of responsibility to the individual and to society, a sensitivity to human differences,

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both group and individual. I will not here taxonomize those values, mainly because I have some trouble in doing so without sounding like a proponent of the Christian ethic. Certainly a competency-based system must seek to determine what the values and attitudes of a prospective teacher are and whether they seem appropriate to the certifying group's best sense of the profession; whether these values can be inculcated is doubtful.

Having sought to define some competencies that I think valuable, I would conclude by considering the value of the exercise I have gone through. First it has enabled me to think about the profession and what a professional is. Second, it has caused me to think that were a certification group to be developed in a department, that group would be freed to consider ways of allowing students to master those competencies and to present themselves to the certifying agent. As certifiers, they can probably not be much more specific than I have been. Many writers have well pointed out the dangers of over-specification and trivialization. I can only urge that others heed that warning. As curriculum builders, however, the group might seize upon the idea that many of the competencies could be acquired through independent work and tutorial systems, many through short-courses, intensive courses, and the like. A department could restructure its offerings in terms of modules or learning sequences, could allow students to pace themselves in a variety of ways, could allow for experimentation in course offering. A course could be presented in two weeks; the student doing nothing else but that course. Films and television, and computer-based education could be fitted into the total program of a department. Faculty could be given the responsibility for instruction and certification, but need not be bound to a three-day-a-week, hour-a-day, for fifteen week routine.

Third, by what I have omitted, I find that there are certain things that I think important for teacher training that have nothing to do with competence. These are experiences that I think it important for the teacher to have because they are valuable intrinsically, or because the profession places value on them. Among these are actual classroom experiences as an observer, as an assistant, and as an autonomous teacher. All of these could be simulated, but lore and experience tell me that simulation is not the same thing as real-life experience. I would say that a teacher should have the experience of exploring

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a community and finding out all that can be found out about it. One should have the experience of being videotaped as a teacher and observing and analyzing one's own behavior. One should participate in both formal and informal dramatic activities. One should participate in a seminar concerned with the problems of the profession. All of these experiences are, I think, worthwhile. Can I prove their value? I doubt it. Yet I should imagine that most people would agree with me, both teacher-trainers and teachers who have had some of these experiences. There need be no behavioral outcomes; there need be no levels of performance. These are simply experiences to be undergone for their own sakes.

In building a competency-based program, then, I would suggest that one seek strenuously and rigorously to define the concepts, acts, levels of skill, and strategies that a prospective teacher should be responsible for. I would add to that a set of values and attitudes that a teacher should manifest, and I would set forth a series of experiences that are deemed necessary as part of the certification process. Once these definitions are made, the possibilities for making the teacher-training program exciting, intellectually stimulating, and rigorous seem limited only by the imagination of the faculty and the flexibility of the institution.

PASSING THE BUCK VERSUS THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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English teachers, as is true of any other group of human beings, are not above passing the buck when circumstances make it expedient to do so. A few weeks ago a friend of mine who teaches high school English was lamenting over her students' egregious ignorance of the fundamentals of their native language. She put the blame for this sad state of affairs squarely on the shoulders of the teachers in the elementary schools. The elementary school teachers were obviously not doing their job, with the result that high school teachers were being weighed down with a double burden: first, they had to teach grade school English; then, if time allowed and energy remained, they had to

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fulfill their proper task of teaching high school English. Though it was an old story and I had heard it many times before, I listened politely and tried not to show my uneasiness. Living in a glass house, I was not about to cast stones.

I was well aware of the many times I had complained to colleagues in my department about our students, and pointed the accusing finger at high school English teachers. For crying out loud, what's going on down there? They're sending people on to college whose reading and writing abilities are so poor so as to be, in some cases, downright pathetic. And on and on. Of course, when I indulge in such rampages I am being woefully simplistic, but when caught up in a mood of warm self-righteousness one seldom worries about being simplistic.

Few would argue that things could not be better. American education on the whole seems at the moment not to be enjoying the best of health, and there are some, say, Professor Norton Long of the University of Missouri, who go so far as to speak of a serious disease which might ultimately prove to be fatal. Professor Long, a political scientist by training, visited our campus last spring to deliver the Olive B. White Lecture, and railed mercilessly against the state of American education, particularly secondary education. The fact is, he claimed, that each year thousands of students are processed out of our high schools, after being put through what can be called a parody of education, who are virtual foreigners to the principles of basic mathematics, and are scandalously incompetent when it comes to reading and writing English. He feels that these students are the victims of a monumental fraud, and the diplomas with which they are presented amount to little more than cruel jokes. He saved his most withering comments for teachers of English, and I admit that I spent a good part of the hour squirming uncomfortably in my seat.

Although it is healthy to be exposed occasionally to the kind of scathing criticism Professor Long indulges in (it certainly is a preventative against complacency), I personally do not view the scene as pessimistically as he does. For one thing, I do not think that you can with any kind of accuracy make reliable generalizations about "secondary education" and "high school English courses." These are, obviously, large and complicated categories, and within each there is a great deal of variety. I know from experience with certain local high schools that there are some excellent programs in English presently being implemented, and I am acquainted with many dedicated teachers.

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But I also know that there are some incredibly inept programs -- or perhaps I should say non-programs -- in our midst. A few years ago a student came to my office to express her chagrin over the fact that I had given her a "D-" on a freshman English paper she had written. She was upset enough about it to cry, which, needless to say, made for an awkward encounter. I told her to sit down and we would talk about it. What most bothered her, she explained, was the fact that she had been a straight "A" student in her high school English courses. How, she wondered, could there be so great a discrepancy between my estimate of her and that of her high school teachers. We got to talking about her high school English courses, with the result that the puzzle was very quickly solved. The "class project" for senior English, on which she had worked for the entire year, was to keep a thematic scrap book. Her theme, if I recall correctly, was "Women in Politics," and her job was to clip everything she could find on that subject -- news stories, articles, photographs -- and paste them in a scrap book. At the end of the year she received an "A" for her scrapbook, and for senior English. During that year they did no writing and precious little reading. Is it any wonder that she arrived at college as poorly prepared as she did? Clearly this student was cheated as far as high school English was concerned; she certainly wasn't educated. Her high school, by the way, was not in Illinois.

Sometimes the problem is traceable to individual teachers; sometimes -- too often, I'm afraid -- it has been institutionalized by a school or a district. Mediocrity has been made a policy by default, simply because people do not want to accept the inevitable complications which would result from insisting upon high quality performance on the part of both teachers and students. Back to my friend about whom I was speaking earlier. In the same conversation in which she blamed the elementary school teachers for much of her troubles, she told me about a half dozen students whom she had in her class last spring. They were, she said, at least three or four years behind in their ability to read and write, and she finally determined that it would only be compounding their problem to pass them on to the next grade; so, she decided she would not do so. She went to the principal to inform him of her intention, but the squelch was quick and definite. He told her in no uncertain terms that she would not fail those students. It was a matter of district policy. In that district there are no failures; everybody passes.

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There is a curious bit of sheer nonsense in the no-fail mentality. The motivation behind it, I suppose, is grounded in a certain kind of altruism. The notion has it that somehow one would be irreparably damaging a student's ego and committing a pedagogical mortal sin to boot by branding a student a failure. Here is a case in point, however, where the student's "friend" (a teacher or district which does not believe in failure) is in fact his most pernicious enemy. It comes down to the rather fundamental question of whether it is better to tell the truth or to lie. If a student does not display the degree of competence which he should for his grade level, then to treat him as if he does (i.e., pass him on to the next grade) is to do him a great disservice, as well as to do who knows what kind of subtle damage to the integrity of the teacher. This disservice is rendered doubly deplorable, it seems to me, when it is visited upon minority students, for it is but a perpetuation of the worst kind of head-patting paternalism. Sooner or later, when the student is turned out into the "real world" with its celebrated coldness and cruelty, he is going to discover that he has been the butt of a hoax. He took high school English, and was "taken" by it as well.

Evidence to indicate that the situation is getting worse is multiplying. A recent issue of *Time* magazine carried some rather disconcerting information about the general state of English aptitude of students now entering college. In a word, it is poor. The syndrome is pervasive, and by no means limited to institutions of marginal quality. This fall, almost half (I think 46% was the exact proportion) of the incoming freshmen at Berkeley failed a qualifying composition exam and as a result had to be placed in a remedial course. At Harvard (saints preserve us, isn't anything sacred anymore!) Professor Gwynne Evans complains that *most* of the freshmen cannot write a simple, clear sentence. There are, no doubt, many reasons for this deplorable situation, but I do not think we can escape the fact that one reason for it, and an important one, is the current questionable quality of many high school English programs.

Ah, but wouldn't it be comfortable for the likes of us college English teachers if the problem cooperatively localized itself only within the lower levels of the educational system. Life would be so much easier, our beleaguered sense of self-righteousness less vulnerable. All we need do would be to hurl down the bolts from our Olympian perches and wonder out loud when those silly people are going to get their houses in order so that

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we can go about our proper business instead of having to do their job as well as our own. However, in our heart or hearts, we know we can afford no such luxury. If we are honest with ourselves we have to admit that the problem is not *theirs*; it is *ours*.

I am under no illusion as to the fact that there are many responsible people who believe that it is precisely *college* English teachers who are falling down on the job. I cannot help but be aware of this, for I have several colleagues in other departments who constantly remind me of the fact. I have a psychologist friend, for example, who has become somewhat a gadfly, and, often after reading a batch of papers written for his course, calls me up and asks when we are going to get around to teaching some composition in the English department. He suggests that, if everything else fails, we might try approaching it as a foreign language for he is sure that that is pretty much what it is for many of his students. Another friend, a political scientist, has been known to come to my office with evidence in hand. On his last visit he tossed a badly mauled term paper on my desk and asked me to explain to him why this student, a senior who had taken two courses in composition, did not know how to write. He said he was tired of trying to teach English as well as political science. I cannot remember exactly what I said to him, but I suspect I was none too coherent.

Not long ago an engineer who heads a small firm showed me a letter which had been written to him by a recent graduate who was looking for a job. He asked me if I did not think that, given the manner in which it was written, the letter was a scandal. I agreed that it was. He said that on the basis of the letter alone he had no desire of pursuing the case of the applicant any further. He stressed that he was not looking for budding Hemingways, but he was expecting that a college graduate should be able to write at least half-way decently. Further, he operated under the premise that someone who could not competently write his native language would in all likelihood be a less than promising engineer. And then, somewhat diplomatically, he asked me what was going on in the colleges, that kids could come out of them with degrees -- and a minimal knowledge of English. Well, ah. . . .

And then there is the story of Dean Judith Younger of the Syracuse University Law School, who has incorporated an English composition course into her school's curriculum because too many students are arriving who "cannot write a grammatical

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English sentence clearly and with style . . . neither can they utter one."

The anecdotes, no doubt, could be multiplied *ad infinitum*. What they clearly indicate is that we definitely have a problem, and it is time that we cease to be content with merely describing it, or worse still, with accusing someone else of being exclusively responsible for it. For whatever they might be worth, I would like to present a few *attitudinal* changes (I am not here concerned with the specifics of curricula or methodology), the adoption of which are critical if we have any hope of ever facing this problem squarely.

First of all -- and most of what I have said thus far implies this -- we are going to have to stop indulging in evasive tactics. The buck stops with us, each of us, at whatever level we may be employed, as teachers of English. We can no longer afford to fritter away our energies in accusation and recrimination. Nor do we need the kind of well-meaning but irrelevant dramatics which manifests itself in drawing up declarations on the "rights of students' to their own language." Gestures such as this, in essence, amount to an abdication of responsibility, an admission that the task with which we are charged and for which we were educated -- to teach standard English -- is an impossibility after all.

Second, we must begin where we are. We must teach the students who are before us, with the skills that they have at hand. This applies especially, I think, to college teachers, who love to wail over the fact that there are too many kids in college today who, on the basis of their knowledge of English, have no business being there. Well, if it is true -- and I suspect that in many cases it is -- what are we going to do about it? What we *should* do is stop complaining, roll up our sleeves, and start working. These are, for better or worse, the students that we have, and it is our obligation to make them, as a result of their experience with us, better than they are. What this will entail, among other things, is some sound and imaginative changes in curriculum and methodology. If this means establishing a series of courses in remedial English, then that is precisely what should be done. I like to think that we have been positively innovative on this score at our university with respect to our upper level composition courses. We have sharpened our focus and set up several different courses, each with a specialized focus (exposition, argumentation, literary criticism, research writing, biography, technical writing, and creative writing); the

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response has been emphatically positive, and the results encouraging.

Finally, and most importantly, we must, to the degree that we have allowed ourselves to drift away from it, get back to the basic and healthy understanding of writing as a skill. In my own courses I like to stress this understanding by likening writing to sport. We learn how to swim or play tennis or whatever by practicing; so too with writing. We learn to write by writing. There are no short cuts, no easy formulas. Learning to write is work, hard work. And -- glum faces notwithstanding -- I go on to tell my students that I cannot "teach" them to write. It is to be hoped that I will be of decided help to them, but in the final analysis they are going to be teaching themselves to write. I compare myself to a coach. A coach cannot jump into the pool and do your swimming for you; he cannot hit your backhand shots. But if he is good he will be able to give you some critical tips. He will supply you with positive injunctions, and he will point out how you are going wrong when you are going wrong. Most importantly, he will always be there to encourage you, to talk you out of giving up on those dark days when you think the game is lost.

The analogy is a corny one, no doubt, but I think it serves to put the emphasis where it should be -- on the writing. Students must write, write, write, and after they've done that, write some more. Of course, this means that we are going to have to read, read, read, but if we are taking our profession seriously that should not be the kind of thing we attempt to avoid. In point of fact, that is where the learning really takes place, on the pages of the papers the students write for us. By our reacting intelligently and constructively to their work, on a consistent, insistent basis, they begin to see what good writing is all about.

In sum, the burden of teaching English is ours, and although it is often a weighty one, we should bear it, if not cheerfully, at least with professional finesse. We are not, after all, engaged in a fruitless Sisyphean adventure. Students *do* learn to handle language more competently, orally and by way of the written word, as a result of formal academic experiences. All of us bear constant witness to this elemental and encouraging fact.

In keeping with the anecdotal tone of this essay, I will end with a couple more stories. One of our graduates, now a feature writer for the Chicago *Tribune* syndicate, wrote a letter to an English department colleague last spring in which she thanked him for the pains he took with her when she was a student to

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bring home the necessity of developing a clear, forthright prose style. As far as she is concerned, it "has made all the difference." This fall two other colleagues received letters from former students and the messages were essentially the same: they look upon their ability to write well, which they attribute to the influences of these teachers, as one of their most valuable possessions. They made a special point of commending the teachers for the way they insisted upon the importance of good writing at a time when they, the students, were reluctant to appreciate that importance. Subsequent experience, they avowed, had proven the teachers to be right. These are the kinds of things, of course, which we all like to hear. But whether we are the regular recipients of such stimulating "feed-back" or not is really beside the point. With or without plaudits, we have got a job to do.

ELECTIVES ARE COMING! ELECTIVES ARE COMING!

DANIEL R. SILKOWSKI
MAINE WEST HIGH SCHOOL
DES PLAINES

District 207, serving the communities of Park Ridge, Des Plaines, and Niles, has always held that the education of its youth was the best investment in the future. No wonder, then, that as reports, articles, surveys, and conventions seemed to indicate that the student populations were changing in the late '60's and early '70's, English Department chairmen were looking closely at the district wide curriculum practices which affected some 13,000 students.

As early as 1969, Maine South, one of the four high schools in District 207, became aware of the change in aptitude, interest, and ability as reflected on tests for in-coming freshmen. Scores on the Differential Aptitude Test dropped slightly, and were no doubt a reflection on the high school level of the whole change in the educational process being so vociferously expressed on college campuses in the '60's.

Like the other department chairmen, Mr. Marlan Davis of the Maine South English Department could see the time when the traditional English curriculum so nebulously defined as "English I," "English II," and "English III," would come under

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closer scrutiny and even more criticism. As a member of this staff at that time, I was privileged to be among the first to investigate the possibilities of the elective program. The Maine Township curriculum had served its students well; indeed, it still produced a high percentage of college-bound students, high scores on ACT, SAT, Advanced Placement, and National Merit tests. Every year saw several students recognized by NCTE for their writing abilities. Students saw their work published in the *Illinois English Bulletin*.

In spite of the impressive record of success we had achieved in the past, we looked to the future. Thus it was that Mr. Davis organized a nucleus of teachers to investigate the problem of curriculum evaluation and possible revision. I remember with distinct pleasure a trip to Trenton, Michigan, to visit the school that had achieved a national reputation for innovative ideas and the elective program known as APEX. We returned from our trip filled with ideas for similar innovation in our district.

Immediately we were confronted with the problem of curriculum innovation in a district of our size. Undaunted, Mr. Davis and a selected number of his staff began investigating how an elective program might be introduced into our school.

Our first problem lay in the fact that, as a district, the curriculum policy demanded that the same educational opportunities for students exist no matter which of the four schools students might attend. This provision alone prevented our adoption of an elective program for at least a year while we urged the school board and superintendent to let us provide the pilot program for the district. We were further handicapped by the fact that our district was undergoing a period of increasing financial austerity. Funds for summer curriculum work dried up, and it looked as though our seed for curriculum innovation would never get its chance to sprout. Once more, though, Mr. Davis called upon his staff. Providing one common free period for nine of us in the department, Mr. Davis created a core group of teachers who could pursue the problems of change to the elective program without demanding additional funds from the district. True, such a pursuit demanded time and energy that went well beyond the one common period assigned to us, but our interest in providing the best for our students and our enthusiasm for this new venture made up the difference.

During the school year, then, we conducted a survey to obtain student opinion about the elective program. The results were gratifying and indicated a student desire to move in that di-

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rection. At the same time, we polled the English department staff to determine where their interests and special abilities lay. Teachers submitted 3 X 5 cards on which they indicated the kinds of semester courses they would like to teach.

Having gathered this material, we wrote a brief course description for over thirty courses to be offered on a semester basis to sophomores, juniors, and seniors. We decided to make the freshman year a basic curriculum which differed little from the traditional English I offered in the past. We decided to adopt the "phase-elective" system which we had seen in operation at Trenton. Certain courses were devised for students of all levels of ability. The following description was presented to all students both in writing and in later classroom visitations:

Phasing is a way of describing courses by assigning to them a range of number from 1 to 5 to indicate their degree of difficulty:

Phase 1 - Courses are designed for students who find reading, writing, and speaking difficult and have serious problems with basic skills.

Phase 2 - Courses are designed for students who do not have serious difficulty with basic skills but need to improve and refine them.

Phase 3 - Courses are designed for those who have command of the basic skills and are ready to use those skills to gain new experience.

Phase 4 - Courses are for students who have good command of reading, writing, and speaking skills and who have a strong interest in any of these areas.

Phase 5 - Courses are for students who have excellent control of skills and desire a challenging academic experience.

A typical course description would be like the following: *MEDIA STUDIES* (recommended for sophomores and juniors) (Phase 1-2)

Through a study of media the student will investigate how man uses communication processes to understand and control his environment, himself, other men, and machines. A study of the various media as seen in magazines, movies, newspapers, paperbacks, radio, records, and television will result in oral reports and written essays.

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Thus, a given course might have a mixture of sophomores, juniors, and seniors. We devised parallel courses which would offer opportunities for all levels of ability. For example, "Print and Flick" was a media-oriented course designed for students at the phase 1-2 level, while "Art of the Film" was designed for students who were in the phase 3-4-5 range.

To assure some balance in a student's curriculum, we devised a student profile sheet which would give some overview to a student's future in the English curriculum. This overview would give the student, his parents, his counselor, and the English department an opportunity to guide him in his English program. It provided a means whereby we as professionals could impose some limitations on an elective program and assure that the students would be exposed to more than one facet of the complex jewel we call English. It would also assure that we had some control over his education while at the same time we allowed for the freedom of choice which makes the elective program so attractive.

Those of us who had been involved in the planning from the beginning went from class to class to explain the phase-elective system. After presenting to the students the information about the elective program, we distributed a pre-registration form on which the student would list his first, second, and third choices for the coming year. Of course, we could not guarantee in which semester a given course would appear, but we were certain that over 80% of the students would get their first two choices. The third choice was merely an alternative for those situations wherein a real scheduling conflict might occur, or for those situations wherein a selected elective might not have the minimum enrollment of twenty students. As a by-product of the austerity program, this minimum enrollment had been applied to all courses in the district, and thus was not intended to hamper our pilot elective program.

This preliminary registration was completed before Christmas. In that way, students had time over the holiday to re-evaluate their choices and to make changes before the final registration early in the new year. Because we had carefully explained the courses to students before pre-registration, we did not expect too many changes, and in fact, schedule changes were minor.

On the basis of the pre-registration, Mr. Davis assigned teachers to those courses which corresponded to the interest areas indicated by the teachers in their survey.

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After the preliminary registration, the department chairman eliminated those courses which did not have the required twenty minimum enrollment, substituting for those students their third choice. These students were notified that the course they had selected would not be available. Using this information, we distributed a second course offering, listing those courses which student enrollment indicated would meet the required minimum. Students then met with their counselors to confirm their pre-registration choices, or in those few cases encountered, to make alterations as required.

We were especially gratified on two counts. First, even though those courses with catchy titles attracted the numbers of students we had expected, those whose descriptions identified them as more or less traditional in content, e.g., "Grammar Review," "Composition," still received a good number of registrants. Secondly, most students were very realistic in their choices. Aided by teacher recommendations, students more often than not selected those phase-level courses that matched their abilities. In fact, there was a slight tendency for some students who had been C- or D level students in the regular program to select courses at the 3-4-5 phase-level. They understood of course that such courses were designed for students with the levels of skill development described on the registration forms, yet they were intrigued by the challenges that the upper phases suggested. Another interesting fact was noted in that no average or above average students enrolled in the lower phased courses with the idea of earning an A with minimum effort.

We had our problems. Some scheduling conflicts which we had not anticipated did occur; some students were not satisfied and complained that course content did not match the printed description on the pre-registration form; some teachers found themselves spending considerable time preparing for courses other than those for which they had expressed a preference. Yet student and teacher enthusiasm made the program go, and as the first year of operation ended, the elective program had to be considered a success.

The seed for the elective program came to fruition indeed. For September, 1974, Maine East and Maine North have chosen to institute their own versions of an elective program. Maine West, the fourth high school in District 207, remained the only one to adhere to the traditional curriculum. In September, 1973, it was my good fortune to be named chairman of the Maine West English Department. Having seen the success of the elective

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program and encouraged by the recognition that Maine North and Maine East gave to that program, I have decided to propose a similar curriculum change at Maine West.

From the beginning, we had maintained that the elective program initiated at Maine South would be a pilot program for the district, and that whatever courses and procedures were designed for South need not, indeed would not, be imposed on the other schools. Thus it is that Maine East is devising an elective program that will co-exist with the traditional curriculum, while Maine North will have a modified phase-elective program for juniors and seniors only.

I hope to propose a Maine West elective program that will be based not on phasing, that is, not on the difficulty of the course, but rather on skills achievement. The freshman year will be devoted entirely to skills acquisition, with an introduction to types of literature offered only as a secondary objective. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills will be stressed.

The sophomore year should be transitional; that is, not only should it be another opportunity for students to perfect basic skills acquired in the first year, but it should also introduce *some* electives to familiarize students with the registration procedure and the elective concept.

A fuller elective curriculum should be available to juniors and seniors. By this time, students will have had ample time to find their interests and to recognize both their strengths and weaknesses. We will moreover retain full year traditional courses for students who prefer to remain with one teacher for that length of time, or for those students who feel more secure in the traditional program. We will retain our separate, full year courses for both our accelerated track and for those students whose skill development requires special help provided in our "L" track. This eclectic approach therefore provides us with a wide range of possible curriculum offerings to meet our diverse student needs.

The elective program is not without faults. Critics point out the dangers of fragmentizing even further the bits and pieces of knowledge we offer at present. They scorn the elective approach because it seems to offer no continuity or linearity. They question the wisdom of compacting some skill development experiences into *one* semester. They see the variety of elective courses only as so many additional winds to buffet the good ship English as it sails through murky waters and mists clouded with educational jargon. Scheduling offices insist "it can't be

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done." Boards of education automatically see that more courses must mean more money.

If we accept criticisms like these, we seriously limit our opportunities to change; if we deny these criticisms, we must be prepared to shoulder new responsibilities and to expend new energies to vindicate our faith.

The elective approach is not a panacea for the problems of teaching, but it does offer five distinct advantages over a traditional curriculum:

1. It capitalizes on students interest. Student motivation should be high because each student will be involved in choosing his own course of study.
2. It capitalizes on teacher interest. The elective program should provide opportunities for each teacher to work in at least some of those areas that are particularly suited to his tastes and talents.
3. It allows for placement of staff in those roles wherein they may teach to their strengths. Thus, while we all may know something about minority literature, some of us are knowledgeable and better prepared than others. The elective program would allow us to draw on that expertise.
4. Placement difficulties would be eased, in that students usually have a fair idea of their own abilities and would be most likely to register for courses which they felt they could handle.
5. Semester length courses would provide greater flexibility in student scheduling, especially for mid-year graduates or students who need a half-credit course toward graduation. In addition, such courses would enable each student to meet with and interact with more of the faculty.

Newton's law about inertia applies well to human nature; bodies at rest tend to remain at rest unless moved by some outside force. We have that outside force in the shapes of the students who come to us.

A successful change from the established traditional curriculum to an elective program, even a modified one, will require considerable planning on our part. As we desire the best for *all* our students, so too a successful program demands the cooperative efforts of *all* of us. We must be willing and able to forego the comfort and security that teaching the same course for years has built for us. We must be willing and able to adjust curriculum offerings and methods of teaching to suit the needs and abilities of a changing student population.

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The sanction of time supports the traditional program; the urgency of the present and the challenge of the future speak for the elective program.

Having seen the success of the elective program at various schools, I am pleased at the role I, as department chairman, can play in offering this opportunity to the students at Maine West.

Having been involved in the establishment of the elective program at Maine South, having conferred with my counter-parts at Maine East and Maine North, I am keenly aware of the traps that may ensnare administrators, teachers, and students. For example, accurate course descriptions are vital; well-planned course syllabi are vital; the need to assure staff, students, and parents that the elective program is in no way a dilution of the traditional program is vital; scheduling is vital. Indeed, at first glance, the prospect is overwhelming.

But when I consider the opportunities for faculty and student involvement in designing and implementing these electives, when I consider the benefits that must accrue from the fact that students can choose a curriculum rather than merely passively (or even reluctantly) accept one imposed on them, when I see how there exists the possibility for the traditional program and the elective program to stand side by side to serve the needs of a changing student population, I cannot but be enthusiastic and lend my voice to those who already proclaim the good news:

"Electives are coming! Electives are coming!"